

6 ON COLLINGWOOD'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

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R.G. Collingwood's *The Idea of History* (Clarendon Press, 1946) 'is an essay in the philosophy of history'. Philosophy of history, as Collingwood understood it, is of very recent origin. It emerged as a sequel to the rise of 'scientific history' which took place in the latter part of the nineteenth century (254). If one assumes that 'scientific history' is the highest or final form of man's concern with his past, the understanding of what the 'scientific historian' does, or epistemology of history, may become of philosophic interest. And if the older or traditional branches of philosophy cannot make intelligible the 'new historical technique' or solve the problems 'created by the existence of organized and systematized historical research'; if, in other words, 'the traditional philosophies carry with them the implication that historical knowledge is impossible' (5-6), epistemology of history becomes of necessity a philosophic concern or a philosophic discipline. But philosophy of history must be more than epistemology of history. In the first place, epistemology of history is likely to be of vital concern only to certain technicians, and not to men as men. Above all, thought about historical thought must be thought about the object of historical thought as well. Hence philosophy of history must be both epistemology of history and metaphysics of history (3, 184). Philosophy of history comes then first to sight as an addition to the traditional branches of philosophy. But philosophy hardly permits of mere additions. Certainly philosophy of history cannot be a mere addition: philosophy of history necessarily entails 'a complete philosophy conceived from an historical point of view' (7, 147). For the discovery on which philosophy of history is based concerns the character of all human thought; it leads therefore to an entirely new understanding of philosophy. In other words, it was always admitted that the central theme of philosophy is the question of what man is, and that history is the knowledge of what men have done; but now it has been realized that man is what he can do, and 'the only clue to what man can do' is what he has done (10); therefore, 'the so-called science of human nature or of the human mind resolves itself

into history' (220, 209). Philosophy of history is identical with philosophy as such, which has become radically historical: 'philosophy as a separate discipline is liquidated by being converted into history' (x).

Collingwood was prevented by his death from elaborating his philosophy of history in the full sense of the term. He believed that he could do no more than to attempt 'a philosophic inquiry into the nature of history regarded as a special type or form of knowledge with a special type of object' (7). Since philosophy of history in the narrower sense admittedly points to philosophy of history in the comprehensive sense, it might seem that Collingwood unjustifiably postponed the discussion of the fundamental issue. But it is perhaps fairer to say that philosophy of history in the comprehensive sense presupposes philosophy of history in the narrower sense, or that the fusion of philosophy and history presupposes the soundness or adequacy of 'scientific history': if the historical understanding of the last four or five generations is not decisively superior to the historical understanding that was possible in the past, the conversion of philosophy into history loses its most convincing, or at least its most persuasive, justification.

Scientific history, being 'now a thing within the compass of everyone' (320), is the co-operative effort of a very large number of contemporaries which is directed toward the acquisition of such knowledge as 'ideally' forms part of 'a universal history' or of knowledge of 'the human past in its entirety' (27, 209). It is a theoretical pursuit; it is 'actuated by a sheer desire for truth' and by no other concern (60-1). The attitude of the scientific historian, however, is not that of a spectator. Knowledge of what men have done is knowledge of what men have thought: 'All history is the history of thought' (215, 304). Scientific history is thought about thought. Past thought cannot be known as such except by being re-thought, or re-enacted, or re-lived, or reproduced (97, 115, 218). For the scientific historian, the past is not something foreign, or dead, or outside his mind: the human past is living in his mind, though living as past. This does not mean that the entire past can be re-enacted by every scientific historian; there must be a kind of sympathy between the historian's thought and his object; and in order to be truly alive, 'the historian's thought must spring from the organic unity of his total experience, and be a function of his entire personality with its practical as well as its theoretical interests' (305). Since 'all thinking is critical thinking' and not a mere surrender to the object of thought, re-thinking of earlier thought is identical with criticism of earlier thought (215-16, 300-1). The point of view from which the scientific historian criticizes the past is that of the present

of his civilization. Scientific history is then the effort to see the human past in its entirety as it appears from the standpoint of the present of the historian's civilization (60, 108, 215). Yet history will not be self-knowledge if the historian sees the past in the light of the present of his civilization without making that present his primary theme. The scientific historian's task is therefore to show how the present of his civilization, or the mind of the present-day, or that 'determinate human nature' which is his civilization, has come into existence (104, 169, 175, 181, 226). Since scientific history is a peculiarity of modern Western thought, it may be described as the effort of present-day Western man to understand his peculiar humanity and thus to preserve it or enrich it.

Since genuine knowledge of the past is necessarily criticism and evaluation of the past from the point of view of the present, it is necessarily 'relative' to the present, that is, to the present of a given country or civilization. The point of view of a given historian is 'valid only for him and people situated like him' (60, 108). 'Every new generation must rewrite history in its own way' (248). Objectivity in the sense of universal validity would then seem to be impossible. Collingwood was not disturbed by this danger to 'scientific' history (cf. 265). There were two reasons for his confidence. In the first place, the belief in progress, and hence in the superiority of the present to the past, still lingered on in his thought. He could therefore believe that if historical knowledge is relative to the present, it is relative to the highest standpoint which has ever existed. To see that the belief in progress survived in Collingwood's thought, it almost suffices to look at the Table of Contents of his book: he devoted more space to Croce, to say nothing of other present-day thinkers, than to Herodotus and Thucydides. He took it for granted that the historian can and must distinguish 'between retrograde and progressive elements' in the phenomena which he is studying (135). More than half of his book is devoted to a comparison of the modern scientific conception of history with 'the medieval conception of history with all its errors' (56) and the classical conception with its grave 'defects' (41-2). The second reason why Collingwood was not disturbed by the 'relativity' of all historical knowledge was his belief in the equality of all ages. 'The present is always perfect in the sense that it always succeeds in being what it is trying to be,' or the present has no standard higher than itself (109). There are no ages of decline or of decay (164). Augustine looked at Roman history from the point of view of an early Christian, and Gibbon did so from that of an enlightened eighteenth-century Englishman: 'there is no point in asking which

was the right point of view. Each was the only possible for the man who adopted it' (xii). The historian who sees the past from the point of view of a present must not be worried by the prospect of a future progress of historical knowledge: 'the historian's problem is a present problem, not a future one: it is to interpret the material now available, not to anticipate future discoveries' (180). Being thus protected against the surprises which the future may have in store, the scientific historian can be satisfied that the historical knowledge which is relative to the present, and is based on the material accessible at present, fulfils all the requirements of certainty or science. The fact that all historical knowledge is relative to the present means that it is relative to the only standpoint which is possible now, to a standpoint which is in no way inferior to any standpoint which was possible in the past or which will be possible in the future. Regardless of whether or not Collingwood found a way for reconciling the two different reasons indicated, each of them, if sound, would justify him in assuming that understanding of the past from the point of view of the present is unobjectionable, and in fact inevitable.

The procedure which we have just outlined is characteristic of *The Idea of History*. Collingwood moved consciously and with enthusiasm toward a goal which most of his contemporaries were approaching more or less unconsciously and haltingly, that goal being the fusion of philosophy and history. But he was not very much concerned with examining the means by which he tried to reach his goal. He vacillated between two different views of history, the rationalistic view of Hegel, and a non-rationalistic view. He never clearly realized that these two views are mutually incompatible. The historical reason for this failure was his lack of acquaintance with Nietzsche's epoch-making critique of 'scientific history.'

There is a tension between the idea of universal history and the view that in history 'the mind of the present day apprehends the process by which this mind itself has come into existence through the mental development of the past' (169). If the modern Western historian studies Greek civilization, he may be said to re-enact the genesis of his own civilization, which has formed itself 'by reconstructing within its own mind the mind of the Hellenic world' and thus to enter upon the possession of his inheritance (163, 226-7); he may be said to attempt to understand himself as modern Western man, or to mind his own business. But the case of the modern Western historian who studies Chinese or Inca civilization is obviously different. Collingwood did not reflect on this difference. He justly rejected Spengler's view that 'there

is no possible relation whatever between one culture and another.' But he failed to consider the fact that there are cultures which have no actual relations with one another, and the implications of this fact: he dogmatically denied the possibility of 'separate, discrete' cultures because it would destroy the dogmatically assumed 'continuity of history' as universal history (161-4, 183).

According to one view held by Collingwood, the idea of scientific history, 'the idea of an imaginary picture of the past [is], in Kantian language, *a priori* . . . it is an idea which every man possesses as part of the furniture of his mind, and discovers himself to possess in so far as he becomes conscious of what it is to have a mind' (248); scientific history is therefore the actualization of a potentiality of human nature. According to another view also held by Collingwood, one cannot speak of the furniture of the human mind, and not even of *the* human mind, which as such would be subject to 'permanent and unchanging laws'; the idea of scientific history is not, in principle, coeval with the human mind but is itself 'historical'; it has been acquired by Western man on the basis of his unique experience (of the Christian experience in particular); it is rooted in modern Western thought and its needs; it is meaningful only for modern Western thought (xii, 12, 48-9, 82, 224, 226, 255). Collingwood regarded history as a theoretical pursuit, but he also said that the historian's thought must be 'a function of his entire personality with its practical as well as its theoretical interests.' All history, Collingwood repeatedly said, is the history of thought or of rational activity or of freedom (215, 304, 315, 318) one cannot abandon 'Hegel's belief that history is rational' without abandoning history itself (122); by speaking of 'the contingency of history', the historian 'expresses [the] final collapse of his thought' (151). Accordingly, Collingwood held that understanding of the thought of the past is not only compatible with criticism of thought of the past from the point of view of the present, but inseparable from it. On the other hand, however, he tended to believe that the ultimate facts of history are free choices which are not justifiable by rational activity; or that the ultimate facts of history are mere beliefs; and hence that history is not rational or that it is radically contingent or that it is, so to speak, a sequel of different original sins. Accordingly, he tended to hold that the historian cannot criticize the thought of the past but must remain satisfied with understanding it (cf. 316-18).

Collingwood's failure to clarify his position sufficiently can be explained in part by the need which he felt 'to engage in a running fight' with positivism or naturalism (i.e., 'the confusion between his-

torical process and natural process') (228,181-2). His main preoccupation was with vindicating 'the autonomy of history' against the claims of modern natural science. The view that historical knowledge is partly dependent on modern natural science was based on the fact that man's historical life is dependent on nature; and man's knowledge of nature is not identical with modern natural science. Collingwood was therefore driven to assert 'the autonomy of history' without any qualification: 'the historian is master in his own house; he owes nothing to the scientist or to anyone else,' for 'ordinary history,' rightly understood, 'contains philosophy inside itself' (155, 201). History does not depend upon authority nor on memory (236-8). '... in history, just as there are properly speaking no authorities, so there are properly speaking no data' (243). 'Freed from its dependence on fixed points supplied from without, the historian's picture of the past is thus in every detail an imaginary picture, and its necessity is at every point the necessity of the *a priori* imagination. Whatever goes into it, goes into it not because his imagination passively accepts it, but because it actively demands it' (245). It is because of its 'autonomy' that history must be universal history (246): truth is totality. Collingwood should not have hesitated to call this view 'idealistic' (cf.159). It is indeed not a solipsistic view: historical thought is both autonomous and objective; the historian's house 'is inhabited by all historians' (155). More precisely, it is inhabited by all present day historians. It is a house without windows: the mind of the present day is autonomous or master in its own house because it cannot understand the thought of the past without criticizing it, that is, without transforming it into a modification of present day thought, or because it is not disturbed by problems which it cannot solve ('To ask questions you see no prospect of answering is the fundamental sin in science', 281) or because it is not disturbed by the possibilities of the future ('the only clue to what man can do is what man has done', 10, 180). A particularly noteworthy consequence of Collingwood's idealism is the banishment of biography from history: the limits of biography are 'biological events, the birth and death of a human organism: its framework is thus a framework not of thought but of natural process' (304). This decision had the additional advantage of keeping the subjectivity of scientific history within limits which, for Collingwood, were reasonable. If the 'biographical' is sub-historical, it will as little go into the making of the subject which acquires or possesses historical knowledge, as it will become an element of the object of historical knowledge. Historical knowledge will not become relative to the individual historian. It will retain its objectivity by being

relative to 'the mind of the present day'. A difficulty is created by the circumstance that 'the historian's thought must spring from the organic unity of his total experience', which experience, being total, could be thought to include his 'immediate experience with its flow of sensations and feelings' and those 'human emotions [which] are bound up with the spectacle of [his] bodily life' (304): 'total experience' would seem to include the most 'personal' experiences.

To do justice to Collingwood's idea of history, one must examine his practice as a historian. The largest part of his book is devoted to a history of historical knowledge. That history is on the whole conventional. In studying earlier thinkers, Collingwood never considered the possibility that the point of view from which the present day reader approaches them, or the questions which he addresses to them, might be in need of a fundamental change. He set out to praise or blame the earlier thinkers according to whether they helped or hindered the emergence of scientific history. He did not attempt to look at scientific history, for once, from the point of view of the earlier thinkers. What is not quite conventional in Collingwood's history, are some of his judgements: he had the courage to wonder whether Thucydides and Tacitus deserve the title of historians (29, 38-9). Furthermore, his history of historical knowledge is somewhat obscured by an ambiguity which he did not consistently avoid. His discussion of 'Human nature and human history' culminated in the assertion that historical knowledge is coeval with the historical process, because the historical process is a process in which man inherits the achievements of the past, and historical knowledge is the way in which man enters upon the possession of that inheritance (226-7; cf. 333-4). In this crucial context Collingwood thus identified historical knowledge with accepting a tradition or living in a tradition. As a rule, however, he assumed that historical knowledge is not coeval with historical life but is an 'invention' made at a certain time in Greece (19) and developed later on by the heirs of the Greeks.

The most revealing section of Collingwood's history of historical knowledge is his statement about the Greek conception of history. The Greeks created scientific history. This fact is paradoxical, for Greek thought was based 'on a rigorously anti-historical metaphysics' (18-20). The 'chief category' of that metaphysics 'is the category of substance', and 'a substantialist metaphysics implies a theory of knowledge according to which only what is unchanging is knowable' (42). 'Therefore history ought to be impossible', i.e., impossible as a science; history must be relegated to the realm of 'opinion'. Yet the very view that what

is truly, or what is truly knowable, is the permanent, implied a fundamental distinction between the permanent and the changeable, and hence the insight that change is necessary: the Greeks' pursuit of the eternal presupposed 'an unusually vivid sense of the temporal'. In addition, they lived in a period of rapid and violent change: hence their 'peculiar sensitiveness to history'. For this reason however 'their historical consciousness' was of a peculiar kind: it was 'not a consciousness of age-long tradition molding the life of one generation after another into a uniform pattern; it was a consciousness of violent *περιπέτειαι*, catastrophic changes from one state of things to its opposite . . .' (22; cf. 26, 34). But since they believed that only the permanent is knowable or intelligible, they regarded 'these catastrophic changes in the condition of human life' as unintelligible. They did not deny 'that in the general pattern of these changes certain antecedents normally led to certain consequents', and that these sequences can be established by observation; but they could not tell why 'certain antecedents normally led to certain consequents': 'There is here no theory of causation.' 'This conception of history was the very opposite of deterministic': the sequences of antecedents and consequents are not necessary; they can be modified by the men who know of them; 'thus the Greeks had a lively and indeed a naïve sense of the power of man to control his own destiny'. Since the Greeks were compelled to consider history 'as, at bottom, not a science, but a mere aggregate of perceptions', they had to identify 'historical evidence with the reports of facts given by eye witnesses of these facts'. They did not uncritically accept those reports. But their criticism could not go beyond making quite certain whether the eye witness really told what he had seen, and reaching a decision as to which of various conflicting reports deserved to be accepted. This conception of historical evidence limited history to the study of 'events which have happened within living memory to people with whom [the historian] can have personal contact'; it made impossible scientific history of the remote past: the historian cannot be more than 'the autobiographer of his generation' (22-7).

Some critical remarks seem to be necessary. When asserting that thinking historically and thinking in terms of substance are incompatible, Collingwood presupposed that 'it is metaphysically axiomatic that an agent, being a substance, can never come into being and can never undergo any change of nature' (43). Did the Greeks then not know that human beings, for example, come into being? Or is it necessary to refer to Aristotle's statement that coming into being simply is said only of substances? Why then should the Greeks have been unable to observe

and to describe the coming into being of substances and their changes? Collingwood asserted that in 'substantialist' classical historiography 'all the agencies that appear on the stage of history have to be assumed ready-made before history begins' (45) and that the classics therefore regarded nations and cities as substances, 'changeless and eternal' (44). He did not even attempt to prove that the classics conceived of cities and nations as substances. But even if they did, their almost daily experience would have convinced them that cities at any rate are not 'changeless and eternal' substances, that they are founded and grow and decay and perish, to say nothing of other changes which they undergo. Why then should the Greeks have been unable to observe and describe the coming into being and the changes of cities? To say nothing of the fact that it is safe to infer what men could do from what they did. '... the Greeks could not even contemplate the possibility of raising the problem which we should call the problem of the origin of the Hellenic people' (34). But, to take the most obvious case, were there no Greek thinkers who taught that the human race had come into being, that in the beginning men roamed in forests, without social bonds of any kind and in particular without language, and hence without the Greek language? Certainly these thinkers did not merely contemplate the possibility of raising the problem of the origin of the Hellenic people, but they did raise it and, according to their lights, solved it. Collingwood did not see that the reflections of the Greek philosophers on the nature and origin of language are equivalent to reflections on the nature and origin of nations. If they did not attempt to give historical accounts of the genesis of this or that nation, or of any nation, they had reasons like these: They did not have at their disposal historical evidence of events of this kind; they regarded the city as a higher form of society than the nation; and they thought that societies in their full vigour and maturity were more instructive regarding the highest possibilities of man than are societies newly coming into being. There may be a connection between these views and 'substantialism'. It suffices to note that Collingwood did not even try to reveal that connection. Prudence would have dictated to Collingwood to refrain from speaking of 'substantialism' and to limit himself to saying that the classics were, for whatever reason, more concerned with the permanent and hence with the recurrent than with what is merely temporal and local, or that they believed that the unique can ultimately be understood only in the light of the permanent or recurrent. From this he could legitimately have concluded that from the point of view of the classics, history is inferior in dignity to philosophy or science. To prove his thesis, it would have

been necessary for him to show, in addition, that the primacy of the concern with the permanent or recurrent precludes or endangers serious concern with what happens here and now or what happened there and then. He did not show this. To say nothing of other considerations, one may be chiefly concerned with the permanent or recurrent and yet hold that a given unique event (the Peloponnesian War, for example) supplies the only available basis for reliable observation which would enable one to form a correct judgement about certain recurrences of utmost importance. A man who held this view would of course study that unique event with utmost care, and, assuming that he was a superior man, he might have surpassed as a historian, that is, as a man who understands actions of men, all the scientific historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Collingwood held that the Greeks had a 'historical consciousness' of a particular kind: it was 'not a consciousness of age-long tradition moulding the life of one generation after another into a uniform pattern', but a consciousness of 'catastrophic changes' (22). This statement is, to say the least, very misleading. 'The Greeks' were perfectly conscious of the existence of 'age-long traditions moulding the life of one generation after another into a uniform pattern'. But they believed, or at any rate Plato believed or suggested, that Greek life — in contradistinction especially to Egyptian life — was not dominated by such traditions: 'you Greeks are always children . . . you are, all of you, young in soul; for you do not possess in your souls a single ancient opinion transmitted by old tradition nor a single piece of learning that is hoary with age'. The Greeks were less dominated by age-long traditions than were other nations because there lived in their midst men who had the habit of questioning such traditions, i.e. philosophers. In other words, there was a greater awareness in Greece than elsewhere of the essential difference between the ancestral and the good. On the basis of this insight there existed in classical Greece 'a historical consciousness', not merely of 'catastrophic changes' but also of changes for the better, of progress, and this consciousness was a consciousness not merely of progress achieved but also of the possibility of future progress. Collingwood did not even allude to this element of 'the Greek conception of history'. He apparently never tried to understand 'the historical consciousness' which expresses itself in the first book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, for example. Consideration of this book alone would have sufficed to make him hesitate to write that 'the Greek historian was only the autobiographer of his generation' (27).

But let us concede that a man like Thucydides was primarily con-

cerned with 'catastrophic change' rather than with long periods in which practically no change, or only slow changes for the better, took place; and let us assume that Collingwood has given an account, based on Thucydides' work, of this preference, although Collingwood did not even attempt to do this. Was he entitled to say that the Greeks were forced to regard catastrophic changes as unintelligible, i.e. as in no way traceable to determinate causes? The mere fact that he could not help censoring Thucydides for being 'the father of psychological history' which is 'natural science of a special kind' (29) would seem to prove that there was at least one Greek who regarded catastrophic change as intelligible. According to Collingwood, the Greeks regarded the change from a state of extreme wealth or power to a state of extreme poverty or weakness, as a mysterious rhythm; 'the universal judgment that very rich men, as such, fall . . . is, in Aristotle's view, only a partially scientific judgment, for no one can say why rich men should fall' (24). If Collingwood had considered the analysis of the characters of the rich and the powerful in the second book of the *Rhetoric*, or the analysis of tyranny and dynastic oligarchy in the *Politics*, he could have told us that Aristotle had a good explanation for the fall of rich and powerful men if they are not virtuous or lucky. Collingwood mistook for no theory of causation what is in effect a theory of causation that includes chance as a cause of historical events.

Only because Collingwood disregarded, among other things, what the classics have to say about the power of chance, could he confidently assert that 'the Greeks had a lively and indeed a naïve sense of the power of man to control his own destiny' (24) or that for Hellenic thought 'self-consciousness [was] a power to conquer the world' (36) or that classical thought implied 'that whatever happens in history happens as a direct result of the human will' (41). It taxes the imagination to understand how the same man could have written these sentences a few pages after he had written 'that these catastrophic changes in the condition of human life which were to the Greeks the proper theme of history, were unintelligible' (22).

As for Collingwood's remark that, for the Greeks, history was 'at bottom . . . a mere aggregate of perceptions' (24), it suffices to say that one page later he noted that men like Herodotus and Thucydides succeeded in calling up a fairly 'coherent' 'historical picture' of the events which they studied. In his discussion of the Greek conception of historical evidence, he was silent about the basic distinction between seeing with one's own eyes and hearsay, and the use which the classical historians made of that distinction for evaluating traditions or reports.

In particular, he did not consider that seeing with one's own eyes includes understanding of the nature of man and of the nature of political things, an understanding which fulfils in Greek history approximately the same function which 'historical imagination' fulfils in Collingwood's 'scientific history'.

Collingwood's account of the classical conception of history, which had to be 'in every detail an imaginary picture' in order to conform with his standards of historical truth (cf. 245), indirectly reveals more about 'the idea of history' than do all the subsequent sections of his book. The idea of history is more than the view that knowledge of what men have done or thought is possible or necessary. It is the view that such knowledge properly understood is identical with philosophy or must take the place of philosophy. The idea of history thus understood is indeed alien to classical thought. According to Collingwood, it could not emerge before classical 'substantialism' was abandoned and classical 'humanism' was profoundly modified. If history is the account, or the study, of what men have done, and philosophy is the study of something which is presupposed by all human doings, the idea of history requires in the first place that the apparent presuppositions of all human doings be resolved into products of human doings: this is what Collingwood meant by the need for abandoning 'substantialism'. The apparent presuppositions of all human doings are objects of human knowledge, as distinguished from the products or results of human action. The first step in the direction of the idea of history was therefore that the distinction between knowledge and action or between theory and practice be questioned. Knowledge had to be conceived as a kind of making or production. Collingwood referred in the usual manner to Vico's *verum et factum convertuntur* (64). But he failed to go back to Vico's source, i.e., to Hobbes, and hence he could rest satisfied with the conventional way of describing the genesis of the idea of history. Now, if the thinker or maker is man as man, or every individual regardless of time and place, philosophy remains 'unhistorical'. If there is to be an essential connection between thought, or the content of thought, and time and place, what we know or think must be such a making as is essentially dependent on the making of earlier men, or rather of earlier men who lived 'here', and yet it must be different from earlier thought. It cannot be different from earlier thought if it could have been anticipated, i.e., thought, by earlier, men: it must be the unforeseen and unforeseeable outcome of earlier thought. It is this requirement which Collingwood had in mind when he demanded the abandonment or radical modification of Greek 'humanism' which attri-

buted 'far too little to the force of a blind activity embarking on a course of action without foreseeing its end and being led to that end only through the necessary development of that course itself' (42), i.e., without being led to that end by the plan of a god or of nature (55, 57, 58, 81, 104). He described the requirement in question somewhat more accurately when he contrasted Greek thought with the determinism of seventeenth century natural science which laid the foundation for conceiving of thought as such, and of every 'stage' of thought, as the necessary and unintended 'product of a process' (23, 57, 58, 81, 87). For the reason indicated, he failed, however, to raise the question regarding the connection between the conception of thinking as making and the peculiar 'determinism' of modern natural science. He thus failed to see that the basic stratum of 'the idea of history' is a combination of the view that thinking is making, or 'creative', with the need, engendered by that view, of giving a 'deterministic' account of thinking, or such a 'genetic' account as presupposes at no point anything except 'motion' or 'process'. Collingwood's 'idealism' prevented him from looking beyond the antagonism of 'idealism' and 'naturalism' or from seeing that 'history' and 'scientific materialism' are inseparable from each other. (Compare, however, the remark on p. 269 about the kinship between scientific history and Baconian natural science.)

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Collingwood did not prove 'by deed' the superiority of scientific history to the common-sense type of history which prevailed, on the most different levels, in the past. His most important statements are errors which competent men in earlier times would not have committed simply because they were more careful readers than we have become. Scientific history is based on the assumption that present day historical thought is the right kind of historical thought. When it is confronted with the fact that earlier historical thought is different from present day historical thought, it naturally concludes that earlier historical thought is defective. And no one can be blamed if he does not study very carefully such doctrines or procedures as he knows in advance to be defective in the decisive respect. Collingwood wrote the history of history in almost the same way in which the eighteenth-century historians, whom he censored so severely, are said to have written history in general. The latter condemned the thought of the

past as deficient in full reasonableness: Collingwood condemned it as deficient in the true sense for history.

This is not to deny that Collingwood also believed in the equality of all ages and that he therefore tended to regard the historical thought of any one period as equally sound as that of any other period. One might think that to the extent to which he held that belief, he would have tried to understand the historical thought of each period of the past on its own terms, without measuring it by the standard of scientific history. Yet the belief in the equality of all ages leads to the consequence that our interpretation of the thought of the past, while not superior to the way in which the thought of the past interpreted itself, is as legitimate as the past's self-interpretation and, in addition, is the only way in which we today can interpret the thought of the past. Accordingly, there arises no necessity to take seriously the way in which the thought of the past understood itself. In other words, the belief in the equality of all ages is only a more subtle form of the belief in progress. The alleged insight into the equality of all ages which is said to make possible passionate interest in the thought of the different ages, necessarily conceives of itself as a progress beyond all earlier thought: every earlier age erroneously 'absolutized' the standpoint from which it looked at things and therefore was incapable of taking very seriously the thought of other ages; hence earlier ages were incapable of scientific history.

The two beliefs which contended for supremacy in Collingwood's thought implied that earlier thought is necessarily relative to earlier times.

The *Republic* of Plato is an account, not of the unchanging ideal of political life, but of the Greek ideal as Plato received it and reinterpreted it. The *Ethics* of Aristotle describes not an eternal morality but the morality of the Greek gentleman. Hobbes' *Leviathan* expounds the political ideas of seventeenth century absolutism in their English form. Kant's ethical theory expresses the moral convictions of German pietism . . . ' (229)

Collingwood understood then the thought of a time in the light of its time. He did not then re-enact that thought. For to re-enact the thought which expresses itself in Plato's *Republic*, for example, means to understand Plato's description of the simply good social order as a description of the true model of society with reference to which all societies of all ages and countries must be judged. Collingwood's

attitude towards the thought of the past was in fact that of a spectator who sees from the outside the relation of an earlier thought to its time.

The deficiencies of Collingwood's historiography can be traced to a fundamental dilemma. The same belief which forced him to attempt to become a historian of thought, prevented him from becoming a historian of thought. He was forced to attempt to become a historian of thought because he believed that to know the human mind is to know its history, or that self-knowledge is historical understanding. But this belief contradicts the tacit premise of all earlier thought, that premise being the view that to know the human mind is something fundamentally different from knowing the history of the human mind. Collingwood therefore rejected the thought of the past as untrue in the decisive respect. Hence he could not take that thought seriously, for to take a thought seriously means to regard it as possible that the thought in question is true. He therefore lacked the incentive for re-enacting the thought of the past: he did not re-enact the thought of the past. We draw the conclusion that in order to understand the thought of the past, one must doubt the view which is at the bottom of scientific history. One must doubt the principle which is characteristic of 'the mind of the present day'. One must abandon the attempt to understand the past from the point of view of the present. One must take seriously the thought of the past, or one must be prepared to regard it as possible that the thought of the past is superior to the thought of the present day in the decisive respect. One must regard it as possible that we live in an age which is inferior to the past in the decisive respect, or that we live in an age of decline or decay. One must be swayed by a sincere longing for the past.

Collingwood had to face this necessity when he had to speak of Romanticism. According to him, Romanticism is in danger of developing into 'a futile nostalgia for the past', but 'that development was checked by the presence in Romanticism of . . . the conception of history as a progress' (87). This remark lacks precision. Its deficiency is partly due to Collingwood's insufficient familiarity with the German intellectual movement around the year 1800. For instance in his statement on Friedrich Schiller (104-5), he limited himself to a survey of Schiller's lecture on the value of universal history without taking any notice of Schiller's essay on naïve and sentimental poetry. Similarly he asserted that 'Hegel wrote the first sketch of his philosophy of history in the Heidelberg *Encyclopaedia*' (111). The romantic soul, we prefer to say, is characterized by longing, by 'futile' longing, by a longing

which is felt to be superior to any fulfilment that is possible 'now,' i.e., in post-revolutionary Europe. A perfect expression of Romanticism is *Madame Bovary*: the dead Emma, who, in spite of, or because of, the fact that she had an *esprit positif*, had spent her life in a longing that led to nothing but failure and degradation, is more alive than the contemporary representatives of the ancient faith and the modern faith who, with the corpse of Emma between them, engage in a noisy disputation, that is, share between themselves the rule over the nineteenth century. True Romanticism regards the highest possibility of the nineteenth or twentieth century, 'futile' longing, as the highest possibility of man, in so far as it assumes that the noble fulfilments of the past were based on delusions which are now irrevocably dispelled. True Romanticism believes that while the past was superior to the present as regards 'life' or 'culture' or 'art' or 'religion' or the nearness of God or gods, the present is superior to the past as regards the understanding of 'life' or 'culture', etc. It believes therefore that the present is superior to the past in regard to knowledge of the decisive truth, i.e., in the decisive respect. It therefore never submits its notions of 'life' or 'culture' or 'art' or 'religion' to a criticism which is enlightened by what the assumed models of 'life' or 'culture', etc., explicitly thought about these themes. Hence Romanticism perpetuates the belief in the superiority of modern thought to earlier thought, and Romantic history of thought is fundamentally as inadequate, or as 'un-historical', as non-romantic, progressivist history of thought.

Collingwood believed that 'in history as it actually happens there are no mere phenomena of decay: every decline is also a rise' (164). This sanguine statement cannot be reconciled with his remark that if we abandoned scientific history, 'we should be exemplifying and hastening that downfall of civilization which some historians are, perhaps prematurely, proclaiming' (56). Here Collingwood admitted that a decline which is not 'also a rise' is possible. Yet this momentary insight did not bear fruit in his understanding of earlier thought. He blamed Tacitus for representing history 'as essentially a clash of characters, exaggeratedly good and exaggeratedly bad', and he blamed the philosophies of Tacitus' age as 'defeatist philosophies which, starting from the assumption that the good man cannot conquer or control the wicked world, taught him how to preserve himself unspotted from its wickedness' (39-40). Since Collingwood dogmatically excluded the possibility of unqualified decay, he could not imagine that there might be ages in which virtuous political action is impossible, and 'defeatist' withdrawal is the only sane course of action; he could not consider the

possibility that such ages may allow of an excess in wickedness in tyrannical rulers, and of a heroic virtue in their victims, for which there are no parallels in happier epochs. His 'historical consciousness' or historical imagination did not leave room for the possibility which Tacitus assumes to have been a fact. His historical consciousness could not be broadened by a study of Tacitus because scientific history recognizes no authority, but is master in its own house: it is not guided by a presumption in favour of the judgements which the wise men of old passed on their own times.

Collingwood was forced to admit the possibility of decline when he discussed the conditions under which progress is possible. For to admit that progress is possible and not necessary means to admit the possibility of decline. But it is precisely his discussion of the conditions of progress which shows how largely he remained under the spell of the belief in necessary progress or how far he was from understanding the function of historical knowledge. Progress, he said, 'happens only in one way: by the retention in the mind, at one phase, of what was achieved in the preceding phase' (333). The retention of earlier achievements is 'historical knowledge' (326). It is therefore 'only through historical knowledge that [progress] comes about at all' (333). Collingwood assumed that 'what was achieved in the preceding phase' has merely to be retained; he did not consider the possibility that it may have to be recovered because it had been forgotten. Accordingly, he identified historical knowledge, not with the recovery of earlier achievements, but with their retention: he uses Aristotle's knowledge of Plato's philosophy, and Einstein's knowledge of Newtonian physics, as examples of historical knowledge (333-4). He further assumed that progress requires the integration of earlier achievements into a framework supplied by the later achievement. He did not consider the possibility that progress may consist in separating recent achievements from their present framework and integrating them into an earlier framework which must be recovered by historical knowledge proper. But whatever might be true of progress, certainly the awareness of progress requires that the thought of the past be known as it actually was, that is, as it was actually thought by past thinkers. For, if to understand the thought of the past necessarily means to understand it differently from the way the thinkers of the past understood it, one will never be able to compare the thought of the present with the thought of the past: one would merely compare one's own thought with the reflection of one's own thought in ancient materials or with a hybrid begotten by the intercourse of one's own thought with earlier thought. What we

might be inclined to regard as decisive insights alien to the thought of the past may in fact be delusions produced by the oblivion of things known to the thinkers of the past. Awareness of progress presupposes the possibility of understanding the thought of the past 'as it really has been'. It presupposes the possibility of historical objectivity.

Collingwood implicitly denied the possibility of historical objectivity by asserting that criticism of the thought of the past from the point of view of the present is an integral element of understanding the thought of the past (215). The historian is forced to raise 'such questions as: Was this or that policy a wise one? Was this or that economic system sound? Was this or that movement in science or art or religion an advance, and if so, why?' (132). Such questions cannot be answered except from the standpoint of the historian's time (60, 108). This conclusion depends in the first place on the premise that there are no unchangeable standards for judging human actions or thoughts. But it depends also on the further premise that the historian's primary task is to pass judgement on the past. Yet before one can pass judgement on the wisdom of, for example, a given policy, one must establish the character of that policy. 'For example, to reconstruct the history of a political struggle like that between the Roman emperors of the first century and the senatorial opposition, what the historian has to do is to see how the two parties conceived the political situation as it stood, and how they proposed to develop that situation: he must grasp their political ideas both concerning their actual present and concerning their possible future' (115). The primary task of the political historian would then seem to consist in understanding a given situation and given ends as they were understood by those who acted in the situation. The contemporaries of a struggle that is similar to the contest between the Roman emperors and the senatorial opposition have an easier access to that historical phenomenon than have people who lack experience of this particular kind of politics. But this does not make the understanding of the phenomenon in question relative to different situations: the difference in regard to the length and the difficulty of the way towards the goal does not affect the goal itself. In addition, 'historical imagination' liberates the historian from the limitations caused by the experiences peculiar to his time.

It may be objected that the very selection of the theme implies the inescapable subjective element: the reason for the historian's interest in a given situation is different from the reason for the actors' interest in it. The reason for the historian's interest in a historical phenomenon expresses itself in the questions which he addresses to the phenomenon

concerned and hence to his sources, and this question is in principle alien to his sources.

The scientific historian no doubt spends a great deal of time reading . . . Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy, Tacitus, and so forth . . . but he reads them . . . with a question in his mind, having taken the initiative by deciding for himself what he wants to find out from them . . . the scientific historian puts them to the torture, twisting a passage ostensibly about something quite different into an answer to the question he has decided to ask. (269-70)

There is no doubt that one may use the classical historians as a quarry or as ruins, to supply oneself with materials for erecting the edifice called the economic history of classical antiquity, for example. In doing this one makes the assumption that economic history is a worthwhile enterprise, and this assumption is indeed apparently relative to the preoccupations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and alien to the classical historians. An intelligent or conscientious use of the classical historians for a purpose alien to them requires, however, a clear recognition of the fact that that purpose is alien to them and of the reason for that being so. It therefore requires that the classical historians first be understood on their own terms, that is, as answering their own questions, and not the questions with which the modern historian tortures them. Collingwood admitted this necessity in his way: 'The question [the scientific historian] asks himself is: "What does this statement mean?" And this is not equivalent to the question "What did the person who made it mean by it?" although that is doubtless a question that the historian must ask, and must be able to answer' (275). But this admission is much too weak. The answer to the question 'What did the person who made the statement mean by it?' must precede the answer to the question 'What does this statement mean within the context of my question?' For 'the statement' is the statement as meant by the author. Before one can use or criticize a statement, one must understand the statement, i.e., one must understand it as its author consciously meant it. Different historians may become interested in the same statement for different reasons: that statement does not alter its authentic meaning on account of those differences.

Collingwood severely criticized 'the scissors-and-paste historian' who reads the classical historians 'in a purely receptive spirit, to find out what they said' and 'on the understanding that what they did not tell

him in so many words he would never find out from them at all' (269). But he did not realize that both 'the scissors-and-paste historian' and the scientific historian make the same mistake: they use the classical historians for a purpose alien to the latter before having done justice to the purpose of the classical historians. And both make this identical mistake for the same reason: they take 'history' for granted. Whatever may be the standpoint or the direction of interest or the guiding question of the present day historian, he cannot use his sources properly if he does not, to begin with, rigorously subordinate his question to the question which the author of his sources meant to answer, or if he does not, to begin with, identify his question with the question consciously raised by the author whose work he intends to use. The guiding question of the historian who wants to use Herodotus, for example, must become, for some considerable time, the question as to what question was uppermost in Herodotus' mind, that is, the question of what was the conscious intention of Herodotus, or the question regarding the perspective in which Herodotus looked at things. And the question regarding Herodotus' guiding intention, as well as the answer to it, is in no way affected by the diversity of questions with which modern historians approach Herodotus. In attempting to answer the question regarding Herodotus' intention, one must not even assume that Herodotus was a 'historian.' For in making this assumption one is likely to imply that he was not a 'philosopher' and thus to exclude without examination the possibility that Herodotus' intention cannot be understood without a complete revision of our 'categories'. Collingwood did not merely fail duly to appreciate the fact that the historian must provisionally subordinate his own question to the questions which the authors of his sources meant to answer. He likewise failed to consider the possibility that the historian may eventually have to retract his own question in favour of the questions raised by the authors of his sources.

Yet while the critical function of the historian may not become noticeable most of the time, or ever, the historian is, nevertheless, necessarily a critic. He selects a theme which he believes to be worthwhile: the critical judgement that the theme is worthwhile precedes the interpretation. He provisionally subordinates his question to the question guiding his author: eventually the historian's own question reasserts itself. Nor is the interpretation proper — the activity which follows the reasoned selection of the theme and which is coextensive with the subordination of the historian's question to the question guiding his author — separable from criticism. As Collingwood put it,

it is a 'self-contradictory task of discovering (for example) "What Plato thought" without inquiring "Whether it is true"' (300). One cannot understand a chain of reasoning without 're-enacting' it, and this means without examining whether or not it is valid. One cannot understand premises without understanding them as premises, i.e., without raising the question whether they are evident or intrinsically necessary. For if they are not evident, one must look for the supporting reasoning. The supporting reasoning, a crucial part of the teaching of the author as the author understood it, might easily pass unnoticed if one failed to look for it, and one is not likely to look for it unless one is prompted to do so by a realization of the inevident character of the premisses concerned. Therefore the establishment of the fact (if it is a fact) that an author makes a dogmatic assumption may be said to be inseparable from the interpretation of the author in question.

But the fact that the historian is necessarily a critic does not mean, of course, that his criticism necessarily culminates in partial or total rejection; it may very well culminate in total acceptance of the criticized view. Still less does it mean that the historian necessarily criticizes the thought of the past from the point of view of present day thought. By the very fact that he seriously attempts to understand the thought of the past, he leaves the present. He embarks on a journey whose end is hidden from him. He is not likely to return to the shores of his time as exactly the same man who departed from them. His criticism may very well amount to a criticism of present day thought from the point of view of the thought of the past.

The fact that interpretation and criticism are in one sense inseparable does not mean that they are identical. The meaning of the question 'What did Plato think' is different from the meaning of the question 'Whether that thought is true'. The former question must ultimately be answered by a reference to texts. The latter question cannot possibly be settled by reference to texts. Every criticism of a Platonic contention implies a distinction between the Platonic contention, which must be understood as such, and the criticism of that contention. But interpretation and criticism are not only distinguishable from each other. To a certain extent they are even separable from each other. Plato's thought claims to be an imitation of the whole; as such it is itself a whole which is distinguished from the whole simply. It is impossible to understand the imitation without looking at the original. But it is possible to look at the original in compliance, or without compliance, with the directives supplied by the imitation. To look at the original in compliance with the directives supplied by the imitation means to try

to understand the whole as Plato understood it. To understand the whole, as Plato understood it is the goal of the interpretation of Plato's work. This goal is the standard which we presuppose, and to which we ultimately refer, whenever we find someone's interpretation of Platonic doctrine defective: we cannot find an interpretation defective without having 'seen' that goal. The attempt to understand Plato's thought as Plato understood it is inseparable from criticism, but that criticism is in the service of the striven-for understanding of Plato's thought. History as history, as quest for the understanding of the past, necessarily presupposes that our understanding of the past is incomplete. The criticism which is inseparable from interpretation is fundamentally different from the criticism which would coincide with the completed understanding. If we call 'interpretation' that understanding or criticism which remains within the limits of Plato's own directives, and if we call 'criticism' that understanding or criticism which disregards Plato's directives, we may say that interpretation necessarily precedes criticism because the quest for understanding necessarily precedes completed understanding and therewith the judgement which coincides with the completed understanding. The historian who has no illusions about the difference of rank between himself and Plato will be very sceptical in regard to the possibility of his ever reaching adequate understanding of Plato's thought. But what is impossible for most men is not therefore intrinsically impossible. If one denies the legitimacy of the goal which we called adequate understanding of Plato's thought, i.e., if one denies the possibility of historical objectivity, one merely substitutes a spurious right of subjectivity and of arbitrary assertions for the honest confession that we are ignorant of the most important facts of the human past.

It is then indeed a 'self-contradictory task of discovering "What Plato thought" without inquiring "Whether it is true".' It is indeed impossible to understand a line of Plato if one is not concerned with what Plato was concerned with, that is, the truth about the highest things, and hence if one does not inquire whether what Plato thought about them is true. It is indeed impossible to understand what Plato thought without thinking, i.e., without articulating the subjects about which Plato thought. Thinking about Plato's subjects cannot be limited by what Plato said or thought. It must take into consideration everything relevant, regardless of whether Plato seems to have considered it or not. That is to say, trying to understand Plato requires remaining loyal to Plato's guiding intention; and remaining loyal to Plato's intention means to forget about Plato and to be concerned exclusively with

the highest things. But Collingwood assumed that we must not forget about Plato in spite, or rather because, of the fact that we must aim at no other end than the truth regarding the highest things. This assumption is legitimate and is not defeated by its consequences, if it means that we may have to learn something from Plato about the highest things which we are not likely to learn without his guidance, that is, that we must regard Plato as a possible authority. But to regard Plato as a possible authority means to regard him for the time being as an actual authority. We must, indeed, ourselves articulate the subjects about which Plato thought, but in doing this we must follow Plato's indications as to the manner in which these subjects should be articulated. If Plato took something for granted which we are in the habit of doubting or even of denying, or if he did not push the analysis of a given subject beyond a certain point, we must regard it as possible that he had good reasons for stopping where he stopped. If it is necessary to understand Plato's thought it is necessary to understand it as Plato himself understood it, and therefore it is necessary to stop where he stopped and to look around: perhaps we shall gradually understand his reasons for stopping. As long as we have not understood Plato's thought, we are in no position to say 'Whether it is true'. The 'historian of philosophy' is a man who knows that he has not yet understood Plato's thought and who is seriously concerned with understanding Plato's thought because he suspects that he may have to learn from Plato something of utmost importance. It is for this reason that Plato's thought cannot become an object, or a spectacle, for the historian. It is to be feared that Collingwood underestimated the difficulty of finding out 'What Plato meant by his statements' or 'Whether what he thought is true'.

History, that is, concern with the thought of the past as thought of the past, takes on philosophic significance if there are good reasons for believing that we can learn something of utmost importance from the thought of the past which we cannot learn from our contemporaries. History takes on philosophic significance for men living in an age of intellectual decline. Studying the thinkers of the past becomes essential for men living in an age of intellectual decline because it is the only practicable way in which they can recover a proper understanding of the fundamental problems. Given such conditions, history has the further task of explaining why the proper understanding of the fundamental problems has become lost in such a manner that the loss presents itself at the outset as a progress. If it is true that loss of understanding of the fundamental problems culminates in the historicization of philosophy or in historicism, the second function of history consists in

making intelligible the modern notion of 'History' through the understanding of its genesis. Historicism sanctions the loss, or the oblivion, of the natural horizon of human thought by denying the permanence of the fundamental problems. It is the existence of that natural horizon which makes possible 'objectivity' and therefore in particular 'historical objectivity'.

Source

Leo Strauss 'On Collingwood's Philosophy of History', *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 5, no. 4 (June 1952), pp. 559-86.